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REFRAMING STUDENTS' NEGATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF FAILURE: AN ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The fear of academic failure can compound other challenges that students are already facing in their lives, and this can take a toll on their mental and emotional states, their relationships with others, and their learning capacities. This article presents findings of an action research that was carried out with 35 postgraduate students from two classes, with aims to reframe their conception of fear of failure as valuable lesson opportunities, by means of getting them to participate in experiential and purposeful activities in a safe learning space. It aims to see if these students would have become less fearful of failures by Week 15. In addition to sharing personal anecdotes of failure, students were given challenging class work, reminded of failure-success catch-phrases, given honest and critical (but compassionate) feedback of their performance. The collected data include students' fear of failure index scores, pre (Week 1) and post (Week 15) intervention course feedback of their fear of failure. The analysis shows that the methods seem to have a positive effect in mitigating fears of failure, however, the research also shows some caveats and variables that can inhibit the facilitation and the

effectiveness of the pedagogical methods. It is hoped this research can also aid other educators in improving and innovating their pedagogy practices, in order to help students reframe their conceptions of failure.

Keywords: Action research, experiential learning, fear of failure, reframing beliefs, safe learning space

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Students' fear of failure can manifest itself as fluctuating self-esteem, low self-control, poorer grades, decreased self-motivation, negative thoughts, and decreased quality of engagement in achievement situations (Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007; Martin & Marsh, 2003). Recent research has suggested that one's fear of failure was likely more focused on the feelings of anxiety, and the evaluation of threat in situations where there was a possibility of failure, shame, and humiliation (Conroy, Kaye, & Fifer, 2007). Psychological symptoms may include feeling nervous in class, excessive worries and anxieties, depression, panic attacks, going blank during a test, feeling helpless, poor memory function, and lack of interest, while physiological symptoms may include sweaty palms, cold, nervousness, panic attacks, increased breathing rate, racing heartbeat, and stomach upset (Ruffins, 2007; Ahmad, Md Yusoff, & Razak, 2011; Owens, Stevenson, Hadwin, & Norgate, 2012). There are many identified source of students' fear of failure, most notably, insensible teaching, an over demanding syllabus, personal or family related problems, geographical upbringing, and societal expectations of one's gender, age, social class, ethnicity, and culture (Mayya, Rao, & Ramnarayan, 2004).

Given the coverage in the literature cautioning the dangers and risks of students' fear of failure, we wanted to determine if our students also experience any fear of failure. Hence, in Week 1 of Semester 1 of 2018/2019, a survey was carried out with 35 students from two postgraduate linguistic classes. Only 16 participated in this survey. This survey includes an inventory developed by Conroy (2003) to measure fear of failure and Duckworth's (2016) grit scores (more of these in the research methods section). 8 participants out of the 16 who responded to this survey, have a fear of failure. When asked how hard they think the class will be, they said: 'very hard' (18.5%), 'hard' (62.5%), 'manageable' (18.8%).

When the students' fear of were aligned to their grit scores, certain patterns in the way they express themselves became evident. Consider the following excerpts of those who fear failure less but have higher grit. They were asked how they would feel and what they will do if they failed.

Table 1: Fear of failure and grit

| No. | Fear of Failure (2 max; -2 min) | Grit (5 max; 1 min) | Beliefs |
|------------|--|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 | -1.8 | 4.3 | Of course I will be sad and disappointed on myself but I will take this positively as part of my journey. Usually I will make sure where was my mistake, reach out for help and also understand why did I made the mistake. |
| 2 | -1.6 | 4.3 | Feel embarrassed/cringe inwardly. Then give myself a mental slap and carry on. Firstly, feel embarrassment but I would certainly try to explain the backstory of why I said/understood wrongly. Then take copious notes (underlined and bold) on the issue and keep in view so that I won't repeat it. |

Students with high grit and low fear of failure seem to construct their agencies using empowering words e.g. taking failure positively, understanding what went wrong and taking actions to rectify mistakes.

On the other end of the spectrum, students whose fear of failure is higher and lower grit tend to have very disempowering discourses. Consider the following.

Table 2: Fear of failure and grit

| No. | Fear of Failure (2 max; -2 min) | Grit (5 max; 1 min) | Beliefs |
|-----|------------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| 1 | 1.2 | 2.92 | Disappointed and discouraged. Move on to other options available to me. |
| 2 | 1.2 | 2.92 | Disappointment. pray. |

In this research, we aim to see if we can reframe students' conception of failure in order to help them overcome their fears of failure, and to remove negative associations of failure. The same postgraduates were asked to participate in challenging group activities. These activities increase the likelihood of students making mistakes. Additionally, graded assessments were carried out to measure their learning outcomes. Students were provided honest but compassionate feedback for the mistakes they made and they were reminded every week of what really matters (more of these in Section 4).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Students' Fear of Failure

Fear is a kind of emotional response that is akin to feelings of anxiousness to a stimuli or belief (Gullone & King, 1993) for instance, believing that failure is bad. While failure is a natural part of life and learning, fear of failure develops when an individual expects the possibility of failure in an activity that has standards of achievements. Individuals who evaluate themselves as having high risks of failure can develop fear and see the situation as a potential threat (Conroy et al., 2007; Sagar et al., 2007).

The fear of failure can be debilitating if it reduces one's function and performance. It can impair students' learning experience, increase their anxiety, shame and depression (Alkhazaleh & Mahasneh, 2016), and in some cases, it can lead to self-harm and suicides (Stanley, Mallon, Bell, & Manthorpe, 2009). Students' fear of failure has also been found to cause relationship tension and frustration between teachers and students (Irvine, 1990). Test-anxiety and fears create irrelevant thoughts, preoccupation, and decreased attention and concentration. Self-handicapping is also possible and can perpetuate low self-esteem, especially if students believe that they are not competent to succeed (Alter & Forgas, 2007). Ultimately, the fear of failure can increase self-fulfilling prophecies (Jussim, 1986).

Unsafe and high-risk learning environment can also create fear of failure among students (Conchas, 2001). Schooling and performance cultures create and sustain fears about academic success and failure, and these have covert impact on pedagogical approaches on students of different social class and gender (Cavanaugh, Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 2007). For instance, teachers who use punishment when students fail assessments can cause students to develop fear (Davies, 2004). Without sufficient safe exposure to high-risk stimuli in early life, and/or a lack of practice in developing competence and overcoming fears, it is likely that children will grow up having lower tolerance for failures (Poulton, Waldie, Thomson, & Locker, 2001), and associating failure with shame. This can lead to perfectionism and strain relationships (Antony & Swinson, 2009).

It is also notable that certain cultures do not accept failure as a norm. Rightly or wrongly, there is a stereotype that Asian communities (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) for instance, regard failure a loss of face. Indeed, face plays such a big role that Asian students have been noted not to participate in classes for fear of standing out too much, and/or they do not want others to see them as being dumb or a failure (Choi, 2015). In America, Asian students develop maladaptive perfectionism, depression and stress (Yoon & Lau, 2008).

Contrary to popular beliefs, fear also has its evolutionary advantages. It is an emotional neuro reaction to danger or observed threat that compels one to fight or flee (Barlow, 2002). Under certain circumstances, fear and anxiety can help us to evaluate and mobilise resources in order to improve performance in some tasks. Shifting the focus from failure as a negative didactic component to a positive component, is likely to help students emphasise the positive impact of failure. It is the ability to learn from mistakes and failures and translate them into learning experiences that will make one successful (Becker, 1993). Madsen and Desai (2010) advise that the knowledge gained from failure depreciates more slowly than knowledge from success, and the scale of previous failures influences how effectively societies can learn from various forms of experience. A positive attitude in terms of the willingness to learn from failure, to explore and to experiment with ideas brings people closer to success (Mueller & Shepherd, 2016). Indeed, Loscalzo (2014) says that failure should be celebrated for one to attain success.

In this research, Conroy's (2003, p. 2) Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory has been used to measure students' degree of fear of failure. The following quote explains his methods succinctly:

... [This inventory survey] measures the strength of individuals' beliefs in five aversive consequences of failing. Scores are provided for each of these five lower-order fears of failing: (a) fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, (b) fear of devaluing one's self-estimate, (c) fear of having an uncertain future, (d) fear of important others losing interest, and (e) fear of upsetting important others. These scores are moderately- to strongly-correlated with each other and their common variance can be modeled with a single higher-order factor representing a general fear of failure. This general fear of failure can be interpreted as the strength of an individual's belief that failure is generally associated with aversive consequences

2.2 Overcoming Fear of Failure: A Review of Some Pedagogical Methods

There is a lot that teachers can do in order to help students overcome their fears of failure. One way is for them to be more approachable and open toward students, as well as using topics and themes relevant to the students' own lives and interests. Teachers should not create highly stressful win-lose competitions, compare students' grades publicly, and enforce strict discipline on students willing to learn (Gregersen, 2003). Since grit is common among successful students (Guerra, 2015), educators should focus on individual students' grit - tenacity, persistence, flexibility, strength, and perseverance (Duckworth, 2016). When students have high degrees of grit, they will become more engaged and productive, motivated, goal oriented, and dedicated (Cross, 2014). Grit make students less susceptible to stress (Lee, 2017). Less gritty individuals "change their direction in order to cut losses," while those with grit resist changing their direction and instead "stay the course" (Maddi, Matthews, Kelly, Villarreal, & White, 2012, p. 21).

A safe and supportive learning environment where students and teachers are respected help to cultivate interactions that reduce students' anxiety (Thompson, Sullivan, & Wilson, 2008). It is also found that such environments promote cooperation, help students to be less defensive when receiving feedback, and do not threaten both teachers and students. Making classrooms feel like homes will facilitate dialogues as it encourages informality and intimacy (Dörnyei, 2002).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

At the end of Week 1, 35 students in both Research Methodology and Discourse Analysis classes were invited to participate voluntarily in an anonymous research survey. Only 16 students answered the Google survey form (<http://bit.ly/2UEnsbl>). The pre-intervention survey

collected details of Conroy's (2003) Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory, Duckworth's (2016) Grit Scale, and testimonies based on fear of failure related enquiries. From Weeks 2 to 14, these following conditions were practised:

3.1 Group Activities in Class

In every class, students are expected to put what had been taught into practice after every lesson milestone. There are usually between three to five group activities where the students need to accomplish certain tasks. Each group has between two to five individuals. On average, there are between four and five group activities each time class is in session. These activities are meant to be challenging for the novice student, and they simulate real expectations of being an academic. Activities like these also aim to prepare them for the assessments, and they provide relatively quick feedback as to whether students have internalised what had been taught. Lecturers can also see if students are struggling with these group work, or if they are not participating, and these can be probed further to see if the students need more attention into certain learning modules. Examples of such activities are as follows:

- Based on the lecture on interdiscursivity and intertextuality, identify these features in the given texts. You are given 20 minutes to work on this. After that deliver a 5 minute presentation to showcase your work.
- Build a grounded theory research. Determine two research questions and justify them. Determine the data types, data collection methods and data analytical methods. You are given 20 minutes to work on this. After that deliver a 5-minute presentation to showcase your work.

3.2 Group Activities in Class

Students are reminded weekly at the beginning of the class of what they need to anticipate for their assessments. In a way, this reminder helps students to remain focused, be reminded of certain expectations, and to not procrastinate until the last minute. They are also informed in detail of what they need to do in order to perform well. Otherwise, their likelihood of failure is high. The guided assessment guidelines are usually very structured in my classes. For instance:

Assessment 2. Seminar - Week 7 (20 marks - 15%)

Course Learning Outcomes

- Evaluate the main issues in discourse analysis from a theoretical model, research title, methodology and findings (CLO2) (PLO6)

Purpose

- This assessment looks at how candidates evaluate and review literature in DA studies

Task Instructions

- Pair/group (not more than 3)/individual work
- Select 3 ISI/Scopus indexed articles in discourse analysis (linguistics) that deal with primary data of the same theme/approaches/data
- FOCUS ON TOPICS/THEMES COVERED FROM WEEKS 1-5
- Make sure your presentation provides information to the following questions:
- What are these research articles about?
- What is special about these articles that we need to care about it?
- What is interesting/new to you?
- What approaches were used to generate the findings? Data, data collection and analysis methods
- What are the advantages/novelty of the articles?
- What are the limitations of the articles?
- 15 minutes presentation (please practice your presentation - do not read from the slides, or dump your essay on the slides)

Assessment Criteria

- Quality of article summary (CLO2) (PLO6) (10 marks)
- Critique of articles (CLO2) (PLO6) (10 marks)

Reminders like these prevent shocks and unpreparedness, as these can lead to unnecessary increase in students' fear of failure. Lecturers must remember that their role is not to 'trick' or catch students who are unprepared, but to facilitate learning. Students are always informed what is expected of them, why the assessment matters, what they need to do in order to score high marks, and how marks will be awarded to them. Assessments are never meant to be of the 'trickery' type, where they are deceiving, or have proximity answers, or the kind where candidates must provide rigid 'correct' answers. This is because assessments are ideally meant to test competence, and to provide feedback to students so that they can achieve mastery. If

students do not understand the philosophical purpose of assessments, they will fail to learn that failures are multifaceted in nature, and there are only prescribed ‘correct’ ways of doing things.

3.3 Honest but Compassionate Feedback

Feedback is provided back to the students as quickly as possible (within two weeks) after students have submitted their assessments or have given their presentations, in order to facilitate learning and memory retention. Feedback is provided in three ways; i) a confidential and personalised feedback sent via email, ii) feedback on students’ hard copies, and iii) a public sharing of feedback of students’ presentations so that everyone can learn from the experience. Because honest feedback can be painful to the recipients, feedback must also be delivered as compassionately as possible. When students produce good work, they are commended publicly and privately for a job well done. However, if students’ assessment results are below standard expectations or if students do not actively participate in classroom discussions and group activities, they are consulted privately. Examples of feedback given are: “My job is not to be an antagonist, but to be your intellectual sparring partner”, “Your work does not indicate that you understood what has been taught”, “Excellent work. You demonstrated expertise”, “You need to take your learning more seriously or else you may repeat the course”, and “You have every opportunity to consult with your peers and ask me questions”.

In giving feedback, we also ensure that we try to understand why some students are not doing well, and what the circumstances that they are going through are. Listening to them and understanding their predicament can be helpful in choosing the right kinds of strategies to help students learn.

3.4 Reminders of What Really Matters

Often after assessments, students who did not do well are ashamed of their performance and would exhibit demoralised behaviour. The following principles like the following are shared with students in class after feedback is provided:

- There is no failure, only valuable lesson opportunities, so make all the mistakes you need to learn not to make them again.
- Failure is a real opportunity to learn something about yourself.
- Failure is just a grade, you shouldn't let labels or grades hamper your self-esteem.
- Success are built upon stepping stones of failures.
- Just because you pass, it doesn't mean you are competent.
- Your grade is not a reflection of your intelligence, but a cross-sectional screenshot of how you performed.
- Success is not necessarily linear and scripted.
- Failure is one of the best teachers you can get especially if you see significance in your failures.
- If you are shy, embarrassed or not proactive to participate, you are also preparing yourself for failure.
- You fail when you do not build up on competence.
- You are preparing yourself for failure when you do not see any purpose in what you're doing.
- Nobody else cares about failure more than yourself.
- Stop comparing yourself with others.
- Take charge of your life and learning, because no one else will.
- There are only two options when you experience failure: quit, or grow from it.
- Passion and grit will overcome all failures and fears of failure.
- You can see the glass as half empty or half full. The same applies with failure.

In Week 15, a post-intervention survey was carried out (<http://bit.ly/2PcZNbO>). This time, 17 students participated in the survey. The same items were studied. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and the Spearman correlation coefficient was used to study the relationship of these variables: fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, seeing failure as bad, actively avoid participation, and grit. The qualitative data reveals some themes of fear of failure.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Generally, the respondents on average show an improvement in the following areas. The following table compares the following pre-intervention and post-intervention dependent variable data.

Table 3: Improvement of respondents

| No. | | Week 1 (n=16) | Week 15 (n=17) |
|-----|--|---|---|
| 1 | General fear of failure inventory | 50% - fear of failure | 35% - fear of failure |
| 2 | Grit scale | 62% - moderate and high grit | 70% - moderate and high grit |
| 3 | Is failure bad to you? | 56% - Failures are not bad (moderate to not bad at all) | 70% - Failures are not bad (moderate to not bad at all) |
| 4 | Do you actively avoid participating in something because you fear failure? | 69% - Actively participate | 70% - Actively participate |
| 5 | Do you think the course will help (Week 1) or has helped (Week 15) you face your fears of failure? | 75% - Moderate to very much so | 100% - Moderate to very much so |

We initially wanted to do a t-test comparison of significance between the weeks. However, given that the sample size is small ($n < 30$), it is not advisable for the data to be processed using t-test scores otherwise the effect scores will be large. What the data show from this small sample are average improvement of scores throughout the weeks. There is a 15% drop in students experiencing fear of failure by the end of the course, a slight increase of 8% in student grittiness, 14% increase in believing that failures are not bad, 1% increase in active participation, and 25% increase in believing that the course has helped students to overcome fears of failure. It should be noted however that this increase has not impacted all students.

To explore further if there are any change in the relationships between the dependent variables, a Spearman correlation coefficient analysis was carried out. This method was used because the data are derived from Likert scales responses. The findings are shown in the following table.

Table 4: Relationships between the dependent variables

| Spearman's Rho (Rs) | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|----|-----|
| | W1 | W15 | W1 | W15 | W1 | W15 | W1 | W15 |
| 1. General fear of failure | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2. Seeing failure as bad | .673 | .708 | 1 | | | | | |
| 3. Actively avoid participation | -.305 | -.366 | -.236 | -.770 | 1 | | | |
| 4. Grit | -.436 | -.677 | -.346 | -.575 | .497 | .363 | 1 | |

For the most parts, the correlations are quite consistent between the variables, across the weeks. Here are some notable findings:

- There is a correlation between seeing failure as bad and general fear of failure. As fear goes up, perception of failure as bad also goes up.
- Contrary to our belief that avoidance of participation is correlated with the general fear of failure, the findings show that there is a weak and negative correlation between these two variables. What this means is that students may be fearful of failure, but it does not mean they will avoid participation. Also, just because students participate in the class, it does not mean that they have no fear of failure.
- There is a moderate but negative correlation between general fear of failure and grit. This means that as grit goes up, the fear of failure goes down. This resonates with Duckworth's (2016) claim that people with grit are those who continue to persist even in the face of failure.
- Grit is also negatively correlated with the perception of failure as being bad. As grit goes up, failure is likely not to be seen as a bad thing.

There was a big change in the relationship between the avoidance of participation and seeing failure as bad, from -.236 to -.770. This means that the more the students see failure as bad, the more the students will participate in class. In a way, this is encouraging because seeing failure as bad encourages students to ask more questions in class and participate in group discussion more.

What was peculiar is that grit is also positively correlated with active participation avoidance. This suggests, as grit goes up, students are likely to avoid participation. Could it be the case that the more grit a student has, the more independent the student will become? This is something to be explored further in future studies.

The response to this question, “What do you think you would do if you failed this class or other classes? Or explain in detail how you would feel if you failed this class or other classes in your current state of mind”, can be categorised into two.

Positive responses - 9 (53%)

- This class is very interesting, I may retake it if I failed.
- Retake.
- I would feel discouraged at first but resolve to learn from my mistakes and do better the next round.
- I would feel horrible and stressed but try to understand why I failed.
- Try to find out what’s the cause of failure and retake the course.
- I will try my best in next paper and make sure pass the subject.
- Failure is not final. Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.
- I might feel bad and worried. But will never give up. Will try again.

Note how positive responses tend to empower the agency ‘I’. Some students will feel hurt and demoralised, but there will be positive and remedial action such as reenrolling in the class, figuring why they failed and not giving up. However, the negative responses tend to be fatalistic.

Negative responses - 8 (47%)

- I would have mental breakdown and constant panic attacks. (Well I'm clinically diagnosed with anxiety and depression) I would find it really difficult to face my mother or talk to her in that matter. I might self harm.
- I might have reconsidered my decision to pursue a Masters degree.
- lose my mind
- I'd feel that my future was bleak and I would not have any aspirations.
- If I had failed this class, I would be devastated. I would feel like I have let my parents and even [my lecturers] down. I would feel like I haven't worked hard enough or whatever that I've tried to work hard on is never gonna suffice. I know failure is normal, but to me, this subject means the world to me because it enlightened me to be more open and critical to how I see the world.
- Miserable and devastated
- It would still be unbearable. I would still beat myself up about it.
- Me to myself: "Wow ***** you're a sore loser" and then I will feel very sad and insecure and tell myself that I'm never gonna be good enough for anything.

5.0 CONCLUSION

One problem with generalisability is that the analysis only shows slight (but not significant enough) improvement in psychometric tests among students. Some of these strategies seem to not work with some students, possibly because of other stronger variables such as personalities, priorities, needs, and even culture. However, the students generally think the methods used in this course are generally useful tools that will assist them in reframing the idea of failure. Also, since this is a first study that we have carried out, it escaped our attention to collect data of which of the independent variables had a greater effect on helping students address their fears of failure, and personality tests (like the Big Five), as they all can play a role in student learning styles and their propensity for experiencing the fear of failure. Future studies will need to collect these dependent variables from the students and increase sample size.

Seeing that there are more rooms for improvement, there are several pedagogical practices that can be implemented in the future. A needs analysis should be conducted in order to probe the needs of students. This includes identifying what excites them and what creates their fear of failure. It is also helpful to get ideas from students on how to make classes safer for making mistakes and failing.

We should also consider how a systematic module on addressing the fears of failures can be incorporated into a curriculum, so that it can be replicated repeatedly, even by different instructors. For this to become a reality, it is necessary to strategise the points of introducing safe activities that can elicit failure, and to get students to feel excited about learning rather than to become fearful. Then, through trial and error, modifications and improvements must be made to see if the fear of failure has been targeted sufficiently. This will also require enough samples. The module should also build students' courage by helping them to find 'hope' i.e. helping students develop an expectation of positive outcomes that everything will be alright, even when the students do not do well.

Personal interactions with the students also suggest that to create a safer environment for failure, there should be fewer graded assessments for students, but more ungraded assessments for students to practice. The ungraded assessments should be the stepping stones for students to make mistakes, so that they will be able to perform to the best of their abilities in the graded assessments.

Another way to learn about overcoming failure is to share stories of remarkable individuals who overcame life predicaments. Future classes for instance, can strategically blend the life stories of individuals like Jim White, JK Rowling, Stephen King, Jim Carrey, Chow Yun Fatt, Victor Tan, Harland David Sanders, and Walt Disney, into the curriculum and encourage lively discussions. Exposure to the common theme of these stories vis-a-vis the sheer human will and grit in facing surmounting failure every day can have a normalising effect on making students see failure as something human, and nothing to be ashamed of. Further inquiries can be pursued here in the future. However, because these stories can be rather long, they can eat into the time of the actual classes. One way to mitigate this is to provide a resource page on Moodle, and to share these stories with students on group chats and social media.

One feedback that we also received from students is that they wished the lecturers to be more approachable and gentler. They wish for lecturers to be friendlier and encouraging even if they are doing well. Otherwise, they feel stressed and intimidated by their lecturers. It is hoped that these ideas and our pedagogical methods can also be beneficiary to other academics who face similar issues.

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